

Celebrating service learning

BY N. SUSAN EMEAGWALI, LISA BERKEY AND MARTHA GUEMPEL

This month's *Techniques* magazine celebrates service-learning and the contributions that it makes to students' learning by fostering civic engagement while students learn in a hands-on real-world context. For close to half a century, service-learning has spread throughout schools in the United States as students engage in activities as diverse as the schools the students attend. From road safety to helping feed those in need to organizing a blood drive, students have embraced the opportunities to be agents of change in their communities, while at the

same time learning invaluable lessons that are linked to the curriculum.

Centennial High in Franklin

What are your students passionate about? The answer is whatever they care deeply about. At Centennial High in Franklin, Tennessee, students are passionate about safety. The busy street in front of Centennial was the site of a serious student injury on the first day of school this year. And so when MBAResearch High School of Business teacher Robbie Reed told students in her "Leadership" course that they would complete a service-learning project that

semester to meet a community need, the students immediately chose to make the school crossing safer.

They backed up their passion with research that revealed a history of accidents at the site. From this, they set a goal to convince the mayor and city officials to install a traffic light and rework crossing zones. The semester involved research into traffic patterns, data crunching, a partnership with students in the "Marketing Research and Analysis" course, and preparation to deliver a professional presentation. The result? The mayor called it one of the best fact-grounded presentations he's seen;

he sent the traffic engineer to work with the school to turn the students' recommendations into reality.

"Leadership" is the first course in MBAResearch and Curriculum Center's High School of Business program. The curriculum guides students through the steps of a service-learning project as they learn valuable leadership skills. But it's the connection to the recipients that can have life-altering impact on students. At Renaissance High in Detroit, Michigan, a class decided to serve its community through collecting and distributing toiletries to a battered women's shelter. While the students were proud of the amount of soap, toothbrushes and shampoo they donated, it was their visit with the recipients that resonated.

Following the visit, their teacher, Lanell Lasenby, shared the emotional day. "I have a 'cutter' in my class," said Lasenby, "you know, someone who cuts herself with sharp objects. At the shelter, the cutter and the rest of the class got to talk to some of the women who were staying there. They heard about some really terrible experiences. More importantly, they heard these women talk about how they got themselves out of bad places (and away from bad people). They heard about the women's plans and determination to make a better life for themselves and their children. Afterward, the students talked a lot about the people they had met. And, the cutter realized that her life wasn't so bad and that she could overcome some of her issues too. It was a very powerful experience."

Eunice Career and Technical Education Center

The culinary arts class at the Eunice Career and Technical Education Center, located in Eunice, Louisiana, recently participated in a service-learning project. The class, under the direction of their instructor Martha Guempel, organized a school blood drive on January 13. All the students and staff at the school attended a presentation by United Blood Services,

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where they learned of the need for blood in the community and the qualifications to donate. Fifty-five participants registered to donate, many of them 16 years old and first-time donors. Skyla LeJeune, a 16-year-old junior, said, "I just wanted to help save lives."

The culinary students who were not eligible to donate provided a service too; they prepared and served lunch to all the blood donors plus the United Blood Services staff. Students were rewarded for their participation with a free Mardi Gras t-shirt, lunch and the opportunity to wear blue jeans to school in place of their school uniform. All of the students agreed the biggest reward was the fact that they helped save lives. By providing the students with a safe and fun experience, they could become lifetime donors.

Dare County Alternative School

Students at Dare County Alternative School in Manteo, North Carolina, face many challenges. Since these students are at risk of continuing their education, the school works to provide an environment that encourages them "to take responsibility for their own learning and behavior so they may develop the skills and habits needed to be successful in school and life." Part of that responsibility is the teaching of civic engagement through service-learning ventures; therefore all students in grades eight through 12 participate in service-learning, according to business and marketing instructor Julia Ray.

Ray's students rotate going to Food For Thought each Thursday morning. They work with elderly members of the community in a production line system to prepare more than 400 bags of food for elementary and middle school children who do

not get enough to eat on the weekends. Students work in the line packing the bags and some work loading the trailer to deliver the bags to the schools. It gives the students experience in giving back without expecting anything in return, Ray says, and some of them even know many of the children who receive the bags—including their younger brothers and sisters. Ray said they are in the second year of this project and last year saw 100 percent participation in community or service-learning activities.

Ray notes the service-learning is tied to the curriculum. For example, the marketing class discusses ways of advertising the service to those in need while students in Ray's computer applications class help her maintain the Web site. Ray notes that students look forward to participating and they work to get their class work done so that they are free to do so. Working with an older generation has also helped to bridge the intergenerational gap that exists between young and old.

"They have changed from being uncertain about the older adults to actively participating in discussions with them," she said. ■

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